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ABSTRACT

The Alan Rufus Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center was established in 1988 to explore the nature of urban elementary education through research focusing on classroom, school, home, and community variables that affect the education of high-risk urban children. The results are used to train teachers to work more effectively in urban schools. The center is under the direction of Old Dominion University faculty with expertise in early childhood education, language and reading skills, and special education working in conjunction with administrators and educators from Norfolk City Schools. Teachers at a local elementary school, which serves as a research site for the center, implement research projects while actively engaged in teaching. (Author/MSE)

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ALAN RUFUS TONELSON TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTER

A community-based urban teaching and learning center of inquiry established in 1988 to explore the nature of urban elementary education. Specifically, the purpose of the center is to investigate classroom, school, home, and community variables that affect the education of urban children and to apply appropriately the results of these investigations. Through the development of the center, the Darden College of Education of Old Dominion University and the Norfolk City Public Schools have entered into a collaborative undertaking to alleviate the problems associated with teaching the young urban student, to improve the quality of teacher preparation, and to build a stronger teaching profession.

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AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory is a two-year project seeking to establish and test a model system for collecting and disseminating information on model programs at AASCU-member institutions--375 of the public four-year colleges and universities in the United States.

The four objectives of the project are:

- To increase the information on model programs available to all institutions through the ERIC system
- To encourage the use of the ERIC system by AASCU institutions
- To improve AASCU's ability to know about, and share information on, activities at member institutions, and
- To test a model for collaboration with ERIC that other national organizations might adopt.

The AASCU/ERIC Model Programs Inventory Project is funded with a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education to the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, in collaboration with the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education at The George Washington University.

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Abstract

There is growing unrest about the quality of public education in the United States. In particular, urban schools with high concentrations of minority, low-income students are being subjected to increased scrutiny.

Minority students are two to three times more likely to be suspended from school and are numerically overrepresented among high school dropouts. In addition, their lack of school success often is compounded by inadequate social and economic conditions (i.e., poverty, poor health care and unstable home conditions). Not surprisingly, minority students in urban environments often fail to identify positively with the educational process. Demographic trends, however, indicate that as population growth continues in the suburbs, large numbers of poor minority children will be left in inner-city schools. While many educators are aware of these trends they may not necessarily be sensitive to their significance or, more importantly, prepared to meet the challenges to urban education which these trends represent.

In response to the needs to explore the nature of urban education and to assist at-risk, elementary-aged children in predominantly black urban schools, the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center was established by the Darden College of Education of Old Dominion University and the Norfolk City Public Schools. The purpose of the center is to investigate classroom, school, home, and community variables which affect the education of urban children and to utilize the results of these investigations to train teachers as well as to emphasize appropriate learning for young urban students.

The center is under the direction of Old Dominion University faculty with specific expertise in Early Childhood Education, Language and Reading Skills, and Special Education working in conjunction with administrators and educators from Norfolk City Public Schools. Teachers at the local elementary school which serves as the research site for the center will implement research projects while actively engaged in the teaching and learning process.

Old Dominion University and the Norfolk Public Schools share a sense of urgency in addressing the problems of urban education. With the diverse school-aged population served by the Norfolk City Schools and the mission of the Darden College of Education to prepare urban educators, these two institutions are working collaboratively in order to establish more effective ways to serve their interests and the interests of the broader urban community. Together their efforts will be directed toward improving the quality of teacher preparation, advancing student academic achievement, alleviating problems associated with teaching young urban students, and building a stronger teaching profession.

TONELSON TEACHING AND LEARNING CENTER

Introduction

Public education has come under increasing scrutiny, with particular attention being directed toward the problem of students in urban environments. Students from culturally diverse backgrounds are three times as likely to come from broken homes and from a situation in which the head of the household is unemployed. In addition, their parent(s) are two times more likely to be functionally illiterate (e.g., Cantrell, 1987; Heward & Orlansky, 1984). Related studies indicate that urban, minority students comprise a disproportionately large segment of special classroom referrals, are two to three times more likely to be suspended from school, and are overrepresented among high school dropouts (Payne et al., 1986; Riley, 1986). These same students often fail to participate in school-related activities and otherwise identify positively with the educational process. Their lack of school success often is compounded by inadequate social and economic conditions (i.e., poverty, poor health care and unstable home conditions). In all, it is not surprising that a burgeoning number of culturally diverse students pose a major challenge to university teacher educators and public school personnel alike.

Research that addresses the problems confronting elementary schools, with high concentrations of urban students, is limited. Much of the effective school research has been conducted at the secondary level and has not focused on the early, formative years of culturally diverse populations. Even so, it is clear that aspects ranging from the biasing effects of assessment practices to the relevance of the content of daily instruction is quantitatively different from predominantly middle-class schools (Cantrell, 1987; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1984). Demographic trends indicate that as population growth continues in the suburbs, large numbers of poor, minority children will be left in inner-city schools. Accordingly, the project described below is intended to address these issues and explore possible solutions to the problems related to the education of elementary grade children in an urban setting.

Project Description and Rationale

In response to the issues identified above, the Darden College of Education, working jointly with the Norfolk City Schools, has

established a community-based urban teaching and learning center in a local elementary school setting. The center will focus on investigations and activities related to the following variables:

1. Classroom--The development of teaching strategies and curricular approaches which can be combined to serve urban students more effectively;

2. School--The affect of building level organizational and administrative factors on the learning of urban students;

3. Home--The interaction of schools and families in a cooperative mode to influence positively the education of urban children;

4. Community--The influence of community and peer group interactions on the education of urban students.

The Darden College of Education of Old Dominion University and the Norfolk City Schools share a sense of urgency in addressing the problems of urban education. With the diverse school-aged population served by the Norfolk City Schools and the mission of the Darden College of Education to prepare urban educators, these two institutions are working together synergistically in order to establish more effective ways to serve the needs of both communities.

The establishment of the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center represents a potentially significant contribution to the urban community. First, the knowledge of classroom and community practices that emerge will be useful to both professionals working directly with urban students and to those who prepare teachers to serve this population. Second, establishment of the "on-site" center will result in additional opportunities for field-based undergraduate and graduate training. Third, the center will facilitate applied research activities that will contribute to the available literature on urban education. In each case, the center will be engaged in providing meaningful and practical information about the knowledge, skills, and affective understandings involved in teaching in an urban environment.

While the development of the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center will most directly benefit undergraduate and graduate students enrolled at Old Dominion University, the center represents a useful model for developing university-school partnerships in other urban areas throughout the country. Teachers and allied personnel will be afforded an opportunity to gain valuable experience and the skills necessary to work in urban educational environments. Ultimately, individuals trained in an urban setting

will be better prepared, potentially more successful in their roles, and represent a higher quality pool of professionals that would be available for employment in urban schools.

The following objectives have been established for the center:

1. Provide preservice and inservice training for University students at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels;

2. Provide a site for research and development activities that address issues of urban education;

3. Provide a model project for the University with which to attract external funds from the public and private sector;

4. Provide a model community school program including extended daycare for the school community.

5. Provide special programs including adult literacy for the school community;

6. Demonstrate and strengthen the University's commitment to working with the urban and black community;

7. Demonstrate the University's commitment to working cooperatively with the Norfolk Public Schools; and,

8. Provide employment opportunities for University graduates in education and other allied fields.

The center is under the direction of Old Dominion University faculty with specific expertise in early childhood education, language and reading skills, and special education working in conjunction with a team of Norfolk City Public School personnel including the Assistant Superintendent of General Administration and Personnel and the Executive Director of Instruction. The Advisory Committee consists of the above personnel as well as selected teachers and administrators from Monroe Elementary School, where the project is located. In addition, Monroe Elementary School faculty implement the center's research projects while actively engaged in the teaching and learning process. The utilization of Monroe Elementary School as an applied research setting enhances the collaborative nature of the center's operation because teachers have the opportunity to lend their firsthand and operational experiences to the design and implementation of

various research projects.

Funding for the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center is being provided for two years by the College of Education, the Vice President for Academic Affairs, and the President of Old Dominion University as well as by the Norfolk City Public Schools. Last fall the center also received funding through the Appalachia Educational Laboratory. Additional internal and external funding is being sought for support from local, state, and national sources to continue the project beyond the original institutional funding period.

Results

In the first year of the project, the center's co-directors worked with Monroe Elementary School staff and Norfolk City School administrative personnel to determine and prioritize project goals and objectives. In addition, project staff members collaborated with the public schools in conducting workshops designed to delineate project details to the surrounding community and to provide training of school personnel in order to facilitate the achievement of project goals. Ongoing research projects include an examination of: 1) the knowledge base and attributional assumptions of a sample of elementary education majors related to behavioral management and instructional strategies employed in the classroom; 2) how elementary teachers in an urban school allocate time for daily activities (both instructional and noninstructional) in the classroom; and 3) teachers' attitudes and beliefs regarding teaching in a low-income urban school in comparison to a middle-class suburban school environment.

Monroe faculty, undergraduate student teachers and graduate-level education students have been and are presently involved in these ongoing research studies. The focus of the first year studies was on classroom and school variables. Survey research and field research methods were used to collect original data. Interim research findings indicate that significant instructional and curricular changes are necessary to meet the needs of these urban elementary students. Thus, collaborative decisions have been made to replace the standardized curriculum with an integrated one; to incorporate performance-based instructional decision-making into classroom assessment practices; and to cultivate a cooperative--rather than a competitive--environment in the classroom and the school.

In order to affect these changes, personnel from both institutions are in the process of developing an ongoing inservice program to prepare and to train teachers and other school personnel

to initiate these changes. This training program will be augmented by the introduction of peer collaboration among classroom teachers instituting these changes. Additionally, components of the teacher training program at Old Dominion University will be modified to reflect these changes.

Through a fuller understanding of the process of urban education the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center is becoming an integral part of the urban education community. Accordingly, center staff have initiated contact with the Park Place Civic League (which represents the community where the school is located) to solicit information about their concerns for the education of their children. Also, civic league involvement was sought with regard to the selection of the project advisory board. Last, the center's community outreach efforts included several presentations which were made to various service organizations in the Norfolk area. Papers addressing project components were presented at two national conferences, as well.

Conclusion

Gaining a more complete understanding of the teaching/learning process in urban elementary schools through the conduct of a series of research activities is the primary focus of the Tonelson Teaching and Learning Center. With this focus the two institutions will have their efforts directed toward improving the quality of teacher preparation, advancing student academic achievement, alleviating problems associated with teaching young urban students. and building a stronger teaching profession. Finally, the first year efforts of the center are encouraging because they indicate that research in the context of a collaboration between a university and a public school system holds the promise of producing practice-sensitive researchers and research-sensitive practitioners.